



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2008 Volume III: Pride of Place: New Haven Material and Visual Culture

Introduction

Local history remains the foundation of all historical inquiry, but it is essential to connect the specifics of place to broader interpretive themes. To provide teachers from a wide variety of subjects, from social studies and literature to science and art, pertinent historical themes and issues, this seminar focused specifically upon New Haven's material culture and artistic practice. Close interpretative analysis of artifacts provided real, palpable insights into production and consumption, demonstrated how people construct and manage social relationships, and revealed the values or aspirations of a specific time period. The goal was not to illustrate New Haven history through objects but rather to analyze and interpret elements of the built environment in a contextual manner through the example of New Haven.

Divided into five different temporal periods -- Colonial Town, Commercial Expansion, Industrialized Landscape, City Beautiful, and Mixed Modernisms -- the seminar explored maps, buildings, gravestones, metalwares, clocks, furniture, sculpture, and painting. Readings provided general overviews of the period and offered models for interpretation, but the emphasis of the seminar was engaging directly with the primary artifactual sources. We handled maps, architectural drawings, gravestones, furniture, and metalwares, and met in front of photographs, paintings, and sculpture. In short, New Haven became our classroom. Engaging resources from local museums, libraries, and art galleries, as well as the architecture and streets of our community itself, the seminar built up visual and material literacy in a contextual way and made the immediate New Haven built environment come alive with possible academic forays.

The variety of topics covered in the units produced for the seminar testifies to the Fellows' engagement. A first-grade teacher, Carol Boynton identifies mapping as an effective means of engaging her students with their physical surroundings. In addition to developing mapping exercises, she links mapping to the drawing of architectural elevations and plans and demonstrates that mapping is not neutral or objective but in fact is a culturally inscribed activity. As an alternative to political or military history, Zania Collier offers a unit for her fifth-graders that unwraps the town of New Haven in 1750 by concentrating on the topography, the role of the central common, and the buildings of that time period. She makes the past come alive through the selective use of maps, church records, and probate records and the introduction of questions about class and economy. Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins focuses upon a specific type of object, the fence, to chart changing socioeconomic trends in New Haven from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries for her young learners. In charting the change from simply joined wooden or piled stone fences to cast iron fences to wrought iron fences, she pays attention to the role of materials and applications, demonstrating that fences reflected changing technology and resource use and structured social interaction in increasingly restrictive ways.

Rather than zero in on a specific type of object, Pedro Mendia-Landa emphasizes the linkage among objects

and calls for the contextualization of an assemblage within its natural setting -- the room. Borrowing the term "period room" from museological sources, he charts the intersection of culture and technology in the change of functions or room use over time. This diachronic study focuses upon the problems of waste removal and the role of the parlor/sitting room/living room. An art teacher for older elementary-school students, Melissa Sands brings the perspective of an artist to public art and its messages. Intrigued by the possibility of a public perceiving public art in ways different from that intended by the artist, she contrasts the didactic public work undertaken in the 1930s under the auspices of the WPA with the fashionable work commissioned under the Percent for Art Program of the past two decades. Her exercises require the students to develop more critical visual literacy. In her high-school Spanish classes, Laura Tarpill probes deeper into Hispanic culture in New Haven by turning her students' attention to their home environment. Raising their awareness of the material world and how it constructs identity, she has developed a curriculum that has them looking around their quotidian worlds for ways in which they function within both American and Hispanic cultures. It is a participatory unit that relies on student fieldwork and comparative analysis.

Fieldwork also lies at the heart of Sara Thomas's high-school art class, which will be working with the New Haven Museum and Historical Society to revise the 1982 publication *Inside New Haven's Neighborhoods*. After introducing her students to the dynamic nature of neighborhoods through mapping exercises linking Sanborn fire insurance maps and Google Maps, she will instruct them in the history and theory of architectural photography and then turn them out into the field to document the five neighborhoods for which she is responsible. Memory and commemoration lie at the heart of Huwerl Thornton's unit for elementary-school students. Intrigued by memorial stones in Grove Street Cemetery and the names of important but often forgotten local figures in the names of streets, he has constructed a unit that encourages students to pay attention to names and history and to develop ideas and attitudes for the memorialization of the living. A high-school art teacher, Kristin Wetmore chose to explore the Amistad case of 1839-40. Rather than simply examine the incident through the lens of legal history or civil rights, she developed a unit that focuses upon the geography of the Amistad case, the manner in which it was represented in popular culture of the period, the lack of interest in the case for more than a century, and the recent reawakening of interest. Like the other units, it touches on issues such as place, memory, representation, and everyday life. The work of the seminar emphatically underscores that material history is indeed the most powerful form of local history.

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